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AUTHOR Bogal-Allbritten, Rosemarie; Levins, Julie H.  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the use of one technique, role play, in the resolution of conflictual situations at various levels in the school system. While a variety of options for dealing with conflict are discussed, primary emphasis is given to that method which resolves the conflict and leaves the relationship intact. The method of role play and its use as a potential tool for conflict resolution are discussed along with a definition of role play, i.e., a technique through which an individual or a group simulates a real life situation. The conditions necessary for favorable role play are enumerated and the steps of a role play are described, including: (1) defining the problem situation; (2) detailing the problem situation; (3) making observer assignments; (4) performing the role play; and (5) discussing the role play. The limitations of role play as a creative tool for conflict resolution are also cited (e.g. age, individuals who are highly dogmatic, cannot tolerate challenges to their authority, or have severe emotional problems). An application of role play in an actual school setting is also provided. (JAC)

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ROLE PLAY: A CONFLICT RESOLUTION  
TOOL FOR THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

by

Rosemarie Bogal-Allbritten, Ph.D.

and

Julie H. Lovins, Ph.D.

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Rosemarie Bogal-Allbritten, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Professional Studies  
Murray State University  
Murray, KY 42071

Julie H. Lovins, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Professional Studies  
Murray State University  
Murray, KY 42071

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## ROLE PLAY: A CONFLICT RESOLUTION TOOL FOR THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

### Introduction

The complexity of the modern school system oftentimes leads to a number of conflictual situations among students, teachers, administrators and parents. Imagine, for example, the following situation: Mrs. Brown, the vice-principal of Carter Junior High School, has just returned to her office to find twelve-year old Billy Jones waiting to see her. After questioning Billy, who is a frequent visitor to her office, Mrs. Brown discovers that he has done nothing wrong; Mrs. White contends that he can do nothing right. The vice-principal is faced with a problem; she must resolve the conflict between Billy and Mrs. White, to the satisfaction of all parties involved, including Billy's parents. Vignettes similar to this one are repeated in classrooms throughout the United States.

In many instances, responsibility for dealing with such conflicts will be placed on the school counselor. This paper will examine various methods of conflict resolution and will focus on that method which resolves the conflict and leaves the relationship intact. Role play will be presented as a viable option for school counselors interested in resolving conflicts at various levels in the school system.

### Conflict in the School System

Conflict has been defined as an antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests or persons.) According to Johnson, an interpersonal conflict exists "whenever an action by one person prevents, obstructs or interferes with the actions of another person; there can be conflict between goals, ways of accomplishing the same goal, personal needs and expectations concerning the behavior of the two individuals" (1972). While the word "conflict" frequently connotes familiar types of conflict such as the war between two countries, or the fist fight between two or more children, it can also be used to describe some of the "problems" faced by the school system. Goldsmith (1977) cites a number of conditions that encourage interpersonal and organizational conflict:

- (1) When there is a scarcity of information about issues, events, and topics vital to the group's maintenance and goal accomplishment;
- (2) When the leader or leaders feel no responsibility to provide a "model" for the ways in which members are to relate to each other, solve problems together, and handle conflict;
- (3) When there is an absence of a common language or a lack of agreement on basic terms and meanings;
- (4) When persons in an institution are not affirmed as having some power over their environment and where there are no identified and approved methods of influencing the structure of the environment or other persons in it; when there is not a clear description of the amount of power possessed by members and no accepted procedures for influencing others.

Anyone who has spent more than several weeks in a school system has probably experienced one if not all of these conflict-producing conditions. Take the case of a common language (or common terms), for example. Each individual hired by a school system is expected to perform a particular task. The principal, for example, is expected to "do" the job of a principal. Deciphering

this task, however, is not simple. Every formal organization, including the school system, usually has a written job description which identifies the roles and responsibilities of employees. In addition, groups within the organization formulate implicit, but frequently unexpressed, behavioral expectations. Added to these formal and unexpressed expectations are those expectations held by the individual performing the task (Gorton, 1972). As can be expected, these role definitions are oftentimes in conflict. If the individual can pick up on these differences, he/she can make some type of response; if the expectations expressed are in conflict, then the individual must decide which expectations (written, implicit or self) are most important. Importance is oftentimes influenced by professional training, by colleagues, by students or by the individual who signs one's paycheck.

Role expectations vary from school system to school system. A principal, for example, may be expected to play the role of a strict disciplinarian in one school system, and an understanding "kind" father/mother in another. Based on his/her training, previous experiences and expectations, the role might be acceptable to the principal. The vice-principal in the opening vignette, for example, might be viewed as a disciplinarian by the student and an ally by the teacher; she might, however, regard herself as a neutral third party. Her handling of the conflict situation between Billy and Mrs. White will be dependent upon:

- (1) a written job description;
- (2) implicit behavioral expectations (on the part of the principal, superintendent, school board or parents);
- (3) her own expectations of herself as vice-principal.

While Mrs. Brown's resolution of her role conflict will not automatically solve the conflict between Billy and Mrs. White, it is a prerequisite; Mrs. Brown must have a clear understanding of how she is supposed to operate within the school system before she can serve as a conflict resolution agent. The dilemma faced by Mrs. Brown is similar to that experienced by a number of school counselors.

### Resolving Role Conflict

Since role conflict is present in virtually any organization, the need for conflict resolution is apparent. An individual can attempt to resolve role conflict in a number of ways:

- (1) He/she can conform to the expectations of Group A (e.g., the teachers);
- (2) He/she can conform to the expectations of Group B (e.g., the students and/or their parents);
- (3) He/she can perform some compromise behavior which represents an attempt to conform in part to both sets of expectations;
- (4) He can attempt to avoid conforming to either set of expectations (Gross, 1958).

Sayan and Charters (1970) added a fifth alternative: he can try to change the direction or intensity of one or both sets of expectations.<sup>1</sup> The individual chooses an alternative based on three conditions:

- (1) The individual's feelings about the legitimacy of each of the role expectations which are in disagreement;
- (2) The individual's perception of the negative sanctions to which he/she may be exposed for nonconformity to one or the other set of expectations;
- (3) The individual's primary orientation to either legitimacy or sanctions as a justifiable basis for resolving a role conflict. (Gross, 1958).

A principal, for example, may "side" with teachers rather than students with regard to his/her role in student discipline, since sanctions imposed by the teachers may be more difficult to handle than those imposed by students. In this case, the principal responds not out of a need for legitimate reasons, but out of a need to avoid certain sanctions. If, however, the students were supported by their parents, the principal's position might change.

### Conflict Resolution

Thus far, we have seen that conflict is not a simple matter; resolution of such conflict can only be accomplished by an individual with a clear role within the organization, in this case, the school system. In other words, Mrs. Brown, the vice-principal, must have a clear idea about her role as a conflict resolution agent before she can begin to solve the conflict between Billy and Mrs. White.

While conflict resolution is oftentimes difficult, its alternative, avoidance, is not a realistic one in a school system. Mrs. White might prefer that Billy be placed in another teacher's classroom, but such an arrangement is not very realistic; even if it were possible, a change of classrooms would not enable Mrs. White and Billy to deal with their problem. If Mrs. Brown is to be successful in helping Billy and Mrs. White to resolve their conflict, she must attempt to investigate the reason for their disagreement; a true mediator needs to know both sides of the issue. While the structure of the school system might place Billy at a disadvantage, Mrs. Brown must be willing to listen to both parties. She must also be able to cut through the rhetoric which is

characteristic of conflict. The "truth" probably lies somewhere in between Billy's statement that he has done nothing wrong, and Mrs. White's contention that he does nothing right. Mrs. Brown must determine the facts of the incident which culminated in Billy's being sent to the vice-principal's office. She must then help Mrs. White and Billy to develop a basis for compromise.

Depending upon her philosophy concerning discipline, techniques which have been successful in the past, and her confidence in her ability to deal with the situation, Mrs. Brown might attempt to deal with the conflict in a variety of ways. She might, for example, talk with Mrs. White and Billy separately, and then reach a decision on the basis of the two stories. This method might take a shorter period of time, but probably will not enhance understanding and communication between Mrs. White and Billy, even if this specific conflict is solved. Another method might consist of having both parties explain their position. Words, however, oftentimes lose their meaning when they are removed from the actual conflict. A third option available to Mrs. Brown is the use of role play. The following section will examine this technique and its value as a conflict resolution tool.

#### The Use of Role Play by the School Counselor

Role play can become a viable option in resolving conflicts. It is the authors' experience that school counselors are reluctant to utilize this technique fully due to their limited knowledge of its use, not because of their disbelief in the method. Like any other treatment technique, knowledge of principles and experience are needed.

Role play can be used by a school counselor in a variety of ways. The most obvious is in a direct treatment relationship, such as helping a child practice saying "difficult" words that need to be expressed to a parent. Role play can also be used with a group of children, in such situations as learning more about feelings, devising ways to handle the classroom bully, developing options for dealing with a classroom problem. The same concepts could be used with individual teachers, a group of teachers or a group of teachers and parents. It can also be used to resolve conflicts between a teacher and a student or an administrator and a teacher.

Role play can be introduced in an in-service for teachers, with the school counselor serving as an ongoing consultant to the teachers. Role play can also be used as a teaching technique and is especially effective in covering family life education, history, social science and health content areas (Force, 1962; Rodman, 1970).

#### Role Play: Definition and Purpose

Role play can be defined as a technique through which an individual or a group simulates a real life situation. A situation is defined and individuals recreate their perception of the event. Generally, the purposes of role play are to enhance the social functioning and to promote the interpersonal growth of the individual. These purposes are congruent with that method of conflict resolution which resolves the conflict and leaves the relationship intact. Specifically, role play attempts to:

- (1) allow the individual to take on the behavior of another person, thus gaining insight into that person's behavior;
- (2) encourage the individual to "try out" other behaviors without fear of reprisal;

- (3) provide the individual with instant feedback on the accuracy of the portrayal or perception of behavior, and the appropriateness of new behaviors; and
- (4) provide a foundation from which the dynamics of a conflict can be discussed (Chesler and Fox, 1966; Klein, 1959; Lippitt, 1964).

Although a degree in acting is not a prerequisite for effective role play, it is necessary for the individuals participating to involve themselves fully.

Thus, role play can take the form of reenacting our perception of a situation that has occurred to us, enacting the way we perceive an event has occurred to another person, portraying how we would like to act in a situation, or reversing the roles of the person(s) involved in the situation, to try to understand the feelings of others. In the case of Billy and Mrs. White, neither could "see" their behavior until the other acted it out in the presence of a third neutral party. In the actual situation on which this vignette was based, Billy's reaction to "seeing" his behavior was - "Did I really do that?"

#### Conditions for Favorable Role Play

Several conditions must be recognized for positive results with role play. First, the classroom or academic climate must be conducive to the technique. A classroom situation in which some degree of free expression is impossible will not be conducive to role play. This oftentimes requires a "developmental approach" in its use by the school counselor. In other words, students, faculty and administrators must be "trained" on a gradual basis to become comfortable with the technique and how to recognize its value. Role play should be introduced in situations that are more amenable to resolution or are less emotionally laden. For example, for a teacher who needs help in preparing for a difficult parent-teacher conference, role play could be utilized,

with the teacher role playing the behavior anticipated of the parent. This would give the teacher an opportunity to present his/her fantasies of the "worst possible behavior " that the parent might exhibit. Since the initial application of the technique was based on the teacher's need, the use of role play to resolve an interpersonal problem (such as a conflict between two faculty members) at a later time should be more favorably received. As mentioned earlier, another idea would be to introduce the technique at an in-service for faculty, and to demonstrate its application in various types of situations. The authors did this by using "typical" school conflicts and having teachers roleplay the various characters in these situations. The use of videotape equipment enabled teachers to review the results of conflict resolution by role play and discuss its effectiveness. These demonstrations could become reference points for later conflict resolution.

Secondly, the individuals involved in the conflict must recognize the need for resolution and must be willing to participate in the process. In the situation cited earlier, Mrs. White would need to be open to alternatives other than transferring Billy to another classroom even before role play could be considered as an option. In role play, other individuals may reenact the situation and present their perception of the event. Two children who observed a verbal battle might reenact it for the benefit of the "original" participant. In addition to allowing the actual battlers "see" their behavior , this option prevents an explosion from reoccurring. This method might dilute the emotional impact of the situation and yet, give credence to the problematic behaviors of the individuals characterized in the role play.

Thirdly, for role play to be effective, the individuals involved must be capable of being sensitive to the needs of others. There must be a climate of acceptance and trust established. If an individual is rigid and dogmatic in approach, it may be too threatening to see their characteristics reenacted. Thus, the personalities of the individuals involved need careful consideration before role play occurs. For example, Billy would have to believe that his version of the story would receive the same degree of consideration as that of Mrs. White, and Mrs. White must be willing to set aside her role of teacher to become an "equal" in the role play.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is the attitude of the leader. This person must feel comfortable with role play as a technique and must believe in its usefulness. This confidence can be obtained only through practice of the technique, and by evaluating its appropriateness with various groups and situations. The authors have found that a number of administrators with whom they have worked, have been somewhat more reluctant to try the technique, especially in front of their faculty. The leader establishes the climate for the role play; and if conviction in the method is lacking, the role play will probably be ineffective.

#### Steps in the Role Play

Although all role play situations are different, there are basic rules or steps for setting up the role play. The readiness of the participants for role play must be evaluated and often facilitated through warm-up exercises. Young children are generally less inhibited and may require only a few exercises. Older students, faculty and administrators may require greater efforts.

Participants may be asked as a group to pretend that they are walking, eating, feeling angry, or experiencing sadness, for example. By sharing in these activities as a group, individuals are less likely to be resistant to role play. Readiness also relates to the gradual involvement with role play as discussed earlier.

Step 1: Define the problem situation--The problem must be a realistic one; it must portray typical roles, problems, or situations that the participants face. Contrived problems for the sake of a role play, usually do not get off the ground. The issue must be one which is meaningful to the participants without being threatening. The topic of sharing responsibilities may be an appropriate problem for a group of sixth graders, but other problems such as the abuse of one of those sixth graders by his or her parents would be best handled individually by the school counselor. Role playing problems with cafeteria duty might be an appropriate topic for a faculty meeting; role playing the severe depression experienced by an individual faculty member would not. The authors found an initial reluctance to acknowledge the existence of any classroom problems, but this resistance broke down when it became apparent during the course of the in-service that it was all right to discuss problem situations.

Step 2: Detail the problem situation--Give the situation a time and place, i.e., the day of the week, time of day, specific location. Give the characters names and ages. Name tags may be helpful to maintain characterization. Arrive at details or specifics about the particular situation. This is important,

otherwise, the characters and audience may be thinking about different situations. Listing the details on a blackboard or newsprint may be helpful in clarifying the situation. In the case of Billy and Mrs. White, the role play was done the same day as the problem occurred and it was reenacted by the characters who were involved. Thus details did not have to be established.

Step 4: Make observer assignments--For role plays being performed before a group or a class, observer assignments will be determined by the size of the audience. Discussion seems to be more productive however, if specific assignments have been given rather than risking that certain observations will be made. Assignments could be made for an individual or a section of the audience to observe specific characters or specific behaviors, such as facial expressions, body posture, tone of voice or verbal content. Since the type of problem presented by Billy and Mrs. White would probably have been difficult to handle in front of a group, observers were not necessary in this instance.

Step 5: Perform the role play--The role play will usually need a minimum of five to ten minutes depending upon how it is progressing. If the role play is not working, stop the role play and pinpoint the problem. Make the necessary corrections and start again.

Step 6: Discuss the role play--Focus first on the role play itself, specifically, was the problem and its solution believable? Look at the actions, verbal

expressions and nonverbal behaviors of the characters as perceived by the audience. Have the actors describe their feelings about their "new" behaviors. Finally, help the audience generalize the information they have received about feelings and behaviors to other situations. It may be necessary to role play the situation again with new characters and new options for problem resolution.

### Limitations of Role Play

Although role play can become a creative tool for conflict resolution, the authors have recognized a number of limitations in its use.

1. Serious emotional problems or situations--Individuals who have serious emotional problems or who have experienced emotionally charged problems such as abuse or incest would be better treated on an individual basis. However, role play could be used as an individual technique; it is not confined to group settings.

2. Individuals who adhere rigidly to traditional methods--Performing a role play, i.e., permitting a child to portray a dogmatic, authoritarian teacher, may be devastating for the teacher and the child, and may in fact, create additional communication problems.

3. Individuals who cannot tolerate any challenge to their authority--These individuals would have difficulty accepting a democratic, problem-solving approach to conflict resolution. Sometimes, these individuals may gain some insight into their personalities by observing a related role play, but this area requires sensitive handling.

4. Limitations based on age group--Very young children may have limited

perspective concerning problem resolution, but they are quite adept at portraying feelings such as happiness and sadness. Role play with adolescents also merits caution. An atmosphere of trust, confidence and a commitment to work on problem resolution must be developed or the role play will turn into a free-for-all, with the school counselor being played against the group.

As with any such technique, an assessment of the problem and the persons involved is needed. With interpersonal conflicts, role play may be a viable option.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The direction of role expectations ranges along a continuum from complete agreement to complete disagreement.

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